SPRING CARE OF HIBISCUS ON THE SOUTHEAST TEXAS COAST

– Robert A. Runyon, Brownsville, Texas

The coming of the Spring months is greeted with enthusiasm by hibiscus growers in this section of Texas. Never getting too cold temperature-wise and with frost or freezes occurring rarely, the plants in the ground at this time of the year are generally large and in good condition. Damage has occurred from the wind in most cases. Those familiar with our winter climate are well aware of the strong south winds before a "norther." They know that for two or three days before the north winds arrive, a strong southerly wind harrasses the plants causing leaf damage, and uprooting plants not properly anchored or with young root systems. Then the south winds stop – a short lull – for soon the cool northerly winds start their nippy gusts. A day or two of the cooler weather with decreasing winds by the day finally brings the "norther" to its end. The days that follow are still, sunshiny and warm.

Although these conditions begin to occor in late November and in December, the northers are few and present little problems. January, February and March are the months of wind. To some extent the conditions prevail until late April; but by mid-March the north winds are a thing of the past. The south winds continue through three or four days of the week caused by low pressure systems elsewhere in the country.

These weather conditions are mentioned for around them the care and culture of hibiscus are centered. In my opinion, the south winds cause most of the camage. With hibiscus never really dormant here, new growth is always forthcoming; and the south winds are responsible for windburn and breakage of the leaf, malformation too of the leaves and buds. The north winds add their destruction to the already weakened new growth. For these reasons, it is recommended that if plants are to be pruned this should be done with caution. Waiting until the first two weeks in March may be helpful to bring forth the new growth around

5T. Iron sulfate
1T. Zinc " + 2 gal H_2O
1T Manganese "

the first of April when the winds are subsiding. Actually pruning for shape or to sever damaged limbs due to a possible frost should be performed then. I do not prune except for these reasons. Severe pruning or cutting back produces better results in late June.

Fertilizing too should be done with caution. Again to not force the new growth out too soon, it is best to fertilize first in mid-March with a commercial fertilizer of 5-10-5 or similar mix and then alternate with organic. Healthy plants may not need fertilizing as the soil conditions around these plants must already be suitable for the plant's needs. In this connection, I may mention that in the lower Rio Grande Valley where I reside, I have found that a continuous program of a small supply of iron sulfate with smaller portions of manganese sulfate and zinc sulfate added, keep the plants healthy and with vigor. In other words, a regular program of this type feeding to ward off chlorosis is superior to a remedy after chlorosis appears. I use 5 tablespoons of iron sulfate with one each of zinc and manganese dissolved in two gallons of water. The amount poured around the shade line of the bush depends on the size of the bush; but I have not used more than a gallon per plant. Done once a month, I have finally been able to enjoy such plants as an own-root of the California Gold variety, the Monarch or Double Burgundy and others due to this program. Also by adding sulfur to the dirt, a slightly acid soil should be produced by chemical action.

Spraying for insect control must be stepped up at this time of the year as aphids and other insects are watchful of new growth. Malathion, nicotine or mixtures of malathion and lindane will produce advantageous sprays. Alternating the poisons will produce good insect riddance, allowing hibiscus growth to result in more perfect blooms and certainly healthier leaves.

Propogation which is curtailed somewhat during the winter months may be put into full force with the coming of Spring. Rooting of tips or heels of green wood may be started in March with successful results